



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/1369801X.2017.1401940](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2017.1401940)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bernard, A. (2018). Coalitions of scholarship. *Interventions International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 20(1), 74-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2017.1401940>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Coalitions of scholarship

Anna Bernard

anna.bernard@kcl.ac.uk

Apart from reading his work, my first contact with Bart Moore-Gilbert was in 2011, when I was a few years out of my PhD. He emailed me to ask if he could include an online position paper of mine in his MA module on “Palestine and Postcolonialism”, which he had been teaching at Goldsmith’s, University of London, since 2008. Palestine has since become more common (though hardly ubiquitous) in English department curricula, but at that point it was rare. Bart’s email was not only personally gratifying, but it also showed me that the disciplinary barriers between English literature and area studies I’d been struggling to navigate were shifting, and that Palestinian literature was beginning to get the wider recognition it deserved.

Bart and I kept in touch over the next few years, but it was only when we started to engage more fully with one another’s work that I got to know him better as a thinker. By his own account, one of the reasons that Bart turned to Palestinian literature in his teaching and research was because of Abdirahman Hussein’s comment that Bart was one of a number of scholars who hadn’t engaged sufficiently with the centrality of Palestine to Edward Said’s argument in *Orientalism* (Hussein 2002, 230; Moore-Gilbert 2009, 113; 2016, 4-5). I came to Said from the other direction – as an undergraduate, I first became interested in Palestine, which led me to Said – but I too think of my reading of Said and my work on Israel/Palestine as intertwined. Bart and I also shared a commitment to a just outcome for the Palestinians, and a belief that Palestinian and Israeli literature and culture constitute a vital intervention

in the domestic and international dynamics of the conflict. But we disagreed on a lot of things too. Here I'd like to lay out some of our differences in the spirit that Bart asked of me when he sent me the draft introduction to *Palestine and Postcolonialism*, which was published in this journal after his death (Moore-Gilbert 2016). When he sent it to me, he had just learned he was ill, and he insisted in the accompanying email that I must "*promise* not to make any allowances". I tried not to make any then, and I will try not to now.

Our disagreement about how to understand the relationship between Palestine and the postcolonial repeats what is arguably the most longstanding and consequential divide in postcolonial studies. This split is commonly described as the opposition between "materialists" and "poststructuralists", though Bart added a third strand, "left-liberal", with which he identified himself (Moore-Gilbert 2016, 4). Graham Huggan, in his recent overview of the field, has argued that the "dialectical interaction" between these "competing revolutionary and revisionist impulses" is the field's main source of energy (2013, 4). I think that Bart may have seen it this way too, because of the zeal with which he approached our differences. In a review essay that Bart wrote about my book on contemporary Palestinian and Israeli literature, he took issue with my materialist position, which I had demonstrated by defending the idea of national narration as a way of reading this body of work. I argued that Israeli and Palestinian authors are equally concerned with the nation as a problem for narrative literature, though for different ideological reasons, and that their work grapples with the political need to imagine a current or future nation-state at the same time that it self-consciously responds to the burden of national representation that its readers place upon it (Bernard 2013, 1-14, 22-28). In making this argument, I somewhat combatively suggested that Palestine's omission from postcolonial studies might be attributed to the

negative attitude towards anti- and postcolonial nationalisms within the poststructuralist (and left-liberal) formations of the field, which makes it difficult to apprehend the “real emancipatory value of the idea of national liberation to the Palestinian struggle against Israeli dispossession” (Bernard 2013, 10).

In his review, Bart objects to this characterization of postcolonial studies, and he especially disagrees with my insistence on the importance of the idea of the nation to Palestinian literature. For him, nation-based struggle is irredeemably compromised by the “failures” of previous anti-colonial national movements, which he claims “derive from patterns of hierarchy and systems of exclusion” that predated the achievement of independence (2014, 240). Contemporary Palestinian writers, he argues, are aware of this history of failure. Thus, while a Fanonian idea of the nation might hold true for Palestinian writing before 1980 (2014, 233), it does not apply to more recent writing, in which he sees “a keen awareness that there is nothing intrinsically liberating in nationalist discourse and its conceptions of belonging” (2014, 240). Instead, he argues, “the more radical contemporary Palestinian writers” provide a “hybridising, border-crossing, dialogistic” imagination of the region, which results in “more generous conceptions of belonging and citizenship” (2014, 240-1). In his introduction for the book, he makes this point more strongly still, locating Palestine’s value for postcolonial studies in its challenge to “the model of an independent, ethnically and territorially coherent, nation-state as the most desirable redress for colonized peoples” (2016, 24).

As will already be apparent from what I’ve written above, I don’t agree that most postcolonial scholarship has advocated national liberation struggle, and I certainly don’t

think that the scholars who have defended it endorse ethnic nationalism, as this final quotation suggests; on the contrary, their work has emphasized the heterogeneity of the colonized populations called to national consciousness (e.g. Parry 1998: 47). I'm also not sure that Bart's characterization of contemporary Palestinian writing holds true. In the review, he doesn't name the Palestinian writers he has in mind, and he doesn't explicitly state that the category of writing that both he and I focus on is Palestinian literature in English and English translation. This constraint raises the perennial question of whether texts that are written in English or selected for translation are more amenable to certain kinds of "hybridising" readings, and whether literature's status as an elite form might produce a greater emphasis on border-crossing. More to the point, the politically "generous" writers that he might have been thinking of – Mourid Barghouti, Anton Shammas, Raja Shehadeh, to name some of the most imaginative figures – do not reject the category of "Palestinian", though they are critical of the Palestinian Authority and previous constellations of Palestinian leadership. Instead, as I read them, each writer works carefully through difficult and contradictory notions of what it means to be Palestinian, separately from and in relationship to Israelis and other Arabs. Bart's use of the word "radical" to refer to a general condition of post-revolutionary opposition and aesthetic experimentation is also worth pausing over, for it assigns an emancipatory value to not only post-nationalism, but also literary modernism. At one point in the draft sections of *Palestine and Postcolonialism*, Bart refers to the "relentless experimentalism" that characterizes Palestinian and Israeli writing, an argument that he says will run throughout the book. This generalization downplays the commitment to documentary realism that characterizes much of the region's writing, especially writing by Palestinians, in a way that is reminiscent of the devaluation of literary realism in postcolonial studies more generally (Lazarus 2011, 21-88).

Bart's drafts suggest that he was planning to work through and substantiate these claims. In the longer unpublished version of the introduction, he names a huge range of Palestinian and Israeli writers, encompassing much of the Palestinian writing available in English translation as well as the most prominent Jewish Israeli writers, including S. Yizhar, Amos Oz, Ghassan Kanafani, Liana Badr, Mischa Hiller, Mahmoud Darwish, Emil Habibi, Sayed Kashua, Sahar Khalifeh, Selma Dabbagh, Leila Khaled, Ghada Karmi, and more. He notes that not all of these authors represent the "dialogistic" position he described in the review; some of them demonstrate the limitations of what he calls "traditional" Palestinian nationalism (a term I also would have liked him to clarify – "bourgeois" or "comprador" might have been more precise), particularly its failure to tackle patriarchy and class stratification. His notes toward the book's penultimate chapter contain a long discussion of Shammas' outstanding novel *Arabesques* (1986), which I agree can be read as dialogistic, though not necessarily conciliatory. More surprisingly, he moves from Shammas to the "left Zionist" writers A. B. Yehoshua and David Grossman, whom he argues also articulate a more inclusive vision of a future Palestine/Israel, in spite of themselves and in contrast to their publicly stated positions. I appreciate the spirit of this comparison, but I am also wary of it, since as I have written elsewhere, an emphasis on "dialogue" aligns with the popular perception that the conflict is prolonged by mutual hatred rather than a profoundly unequal distribution of resources (Bernard 2012: 204-5). The introduction's closing invocation of Theodor Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* as an example of a "critique of the Westphalian model of the ethnically homogenous nation-state" (Moore-Gilbert 2016, 29) shows some of the risks of this kind of thinking: it conflates territorial sovereignty with ethnic nationalism, and it posits

as anti-partitionist Herzl's far from egalitarian vision of a Jewish state that would extend rights to a conquered Palestinian Arab minority.

I wish we had had time to hash this out. I doubt that either of us would have persuaded the other of our respective points of view, but I would have liked to have had the chance to press him on why he saw the failure of anti-colonial nationalism as so total, and what basis he saw the more inclusive political visions of the writers he was interested in as operating within, if not that of a future nation-state, as his account of his own experience of coming to support the "one-state solution" suggests (Moore-Gilbert 2016, 14). Bart wrote that Palestinian writers' imaginations of a future state "which admits all with a right to live there on an equal basis, regardless of ethnicity" was a departure from the "prior model of European nationalisms" that determined both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism from the 1940s to the 1970s (Moore-Gilbert 2014, 240). He doesn't mention Partha Chatterjee's influential notion of nationalism as a derivative discourse (1993), but it seems to underpin his argument, since he posits "European nationalism" and anti-colonial nationalism as expressions of the same phenomenon. He thus overlooks the remarkable ideological syncretism of the anti-imperial nationalisms of the post-war period, which encompassed pre- and post-capitalist notions of community that went well beyond romantic cultural nationalism, at a time when capital had shifted toward the "supra-nationalism" of US hegemony over the allied nations of the "Free World" (see Anderson 2002, 16-19). I would also have liked to know what he made of the work of organizations like the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah/Maki), Matzpen, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who have understood Palestinian nationalism as an intermediate stage in the struggle for international socialism. Even the Palestinian National Charter, which draws

extensively on the language of bourgeois pan-Arab nationalism, sets the Palestinian movement in a wider frame, asserting the nation's commitment to "the principles of justice, freedom, sovereignty, self-determination, human dignity, and [...] the right of all peoples to exercise them" ("Palestinian National Charter"). Should all of these past alternatives be seen as failures, because they lost the battles they waged? Might these traditions of resistance have some lessons for the present?

Interestingly, while writing this piece, I've come to see my disagreements with Bart as related to another issue I've been thinking about lately, the politics and practice of international solidarity. The expansion of the international Palestine solidarity movement over the past couple of decades has meant that the movement has taken on a more coalitional character, bringing together activists from various left traditions as well as activists with identitarian and religious affiliations, which may also now be happening in academic discussions of the question of Palestine. Bart and I wanted the same political outcome in Palestine/Israel, the establishment of a state that will extend equal rights to all of its inhabitants, even if we disagreed about what the realization of that goal would mean and what it would look like. I admire and envy the ambition of his vision for his book, and it is a great loss to postcolonial and Palestine studies that he did not get to finish it. I applaud the extraordinary range of writers he promised to examine; the idealism, even utopianism, of the political imaginary he saw in their work; and the detailed and expansive account of recent Palestinian political history that he wanted to impart to readers who were new to it. When I read his introduction for the first time, I had the sense of being carried along on a wave of narrative synopsis, which is something that I think is true of all of Bart's work. To give the question of Palestine the same stature for English-language literature scholars and

students as postcolonial theory (Moore-Gilbert 1997) and postcolonial life-writing (Moore-Gilbert 2009) – which I’m tempted to call the first two books in his trilogy – was to name it as one of the great struggles of our age, not only in the realm of politics, but also in the realm of culture. We certainly agreed on that point.

Works cited

Anderson, Perry. 2002. “Internationalism: A Breviary.” *New Left Review* 14 (March/April).

<https://newleftreview.org/II/14/perry-anderson-internationalism-a-breviary>.

Accessed 13 September 2016.

Bernard, Anna. 2012. “Consuming Palestine: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Metropolitan Popular Culture.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 16.2-3: 197-216.

---. 2013. *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Huggan, Graham. 2013. “General Introduction: Postcolonialism and Revolution.” *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1-26.

Hussein, Abdirahman. 2004 [2002]. *Edward Said: Criticism and Society*. London: Verso.

Lazarus, Neil. 2011. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moore-Gilbert, Bart. 1997. *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London: Verso.

---. 2009. *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation*. Abingdon: Routledge.

---. 2014. “Nationalism, the Nation and Its Narration in the Literatures of

'Israel/Palestine.'" *Holy Land Studies* 13.2: 229-41.

---. 2016. "Palestine, Postcolonialism and Pessoptimism." *Interventions* (online)

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369801X.2016.1156555>. 1-34.

"The Palestinian National Charter: Resolutions of the Palestine National Council July 1-17, 1968." The Avalon Project, Yale Law School.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/plcov.asp. Accessed 13 September 2016.

Parry, Benita. 1998. "Liberation Movements: Memories of the Future." *Interventions* 1.1: 45-51.

Biographical note

Anna Bernard is Senior Lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at King's College London. She is the author of *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (2013). She is currently working on a book on international solidarity movements and culture.